The Haunted Dollhouses of Diana Thorneycroft

—Peter Hodgins

The work of Diana Thorneycroft has been controversial, to say the least. She is probably best known and perhaps most notorious for a 1999 site-specific show in Winnipeg titled *Monstrance*. Playing with the form of a Catholic reliquary called a monstrance that often holds the bones of various saints, Thorneycroft stitched family-type photos under the belly skin of gutted rabbits that she had purchased at a local fine-food store. Her hope was that the images stitched under the rabbits' skin would become clearer as the rabbits decayed and that the work as a whole would become a poignant reflection on the relationship between death, the decaying body, memory, and mourning.

Unfortunately for her (or fortunately if you believe the adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity), things did not work out that way. On the technical side, the rabbit skins did not decay as quickly as she expected and so the sombre and phantasmic effect that she hoped to produce fell flat. That technical failure would prove to be the least of her worries, however. Almost immediately, the show united three rather surprising bedfellows in their denunciation of it: supporters of the Catholic Church decried her desecration of sacred symbols, animal rights groups accused her of cruelty against animals, and taxpayers associations were furious that the Canada Council was paying for all this. What followed was a wave of sanctimonious editorials, recurrent vandalism of the show, and even death threats against the artist (Werier).

While she is best known by the broader public for *Monstrance*, Thorneycroft began to establish herself as an important presence in the Canadian art scene in the early 1990s as a feminist art photographer. Her cold but eroticized black and white photographs, now collected on her website <http://dianathorneycroft.com> as *The Body, Its Lesson and Camouflage*,[1] dealt with issues of the body in pain, gendered violence, and gender ambiguity. Typically using her own nude body as a model, Thorneycroft composed a series of what can only be described as neo-Gothic depictions

of contemporary martyrdom that evoke early modern paintings of suffering saints, but she inflects them with a contemporary feminist consciousness (Langford 75–94).

During the course of her exploration with the theme of pain and suffering, Thorneycroft began to supplement the image of her own body with those of children's dolls. For my money, *Untitled (Witness)* is perhaps the most unsettling of these hybrid images (see fig. 1). The combination of the grainy image shot on silver nitrate film stock and the retro medical equipment evokes at once documentary photos of late-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century medical experiments that are now seen as unethical (even criminal) and pornographic images of contemporary rubber, medical, or prosthetic fetishes. In the photograph, Thorneycroft's nude body is transformed into an object of both the clinical gaze and the aesthetic gaze, a transformation that provides the image with an unsettling erotic charge: by putting viewers in the subject position of the doctor engaged in criminal and creepy experiments with nude women and girls, the photographs deny viewers the possibility of taking the position of "cultured" and "disinterested" art connoisseurs looking at her nude body. If this were not unsettling enough, there is the enigma of the tubes and the masks: is her vagina breathing life into the dolls, is it a filter, are they feeding from her, or is the direction of transmission the other way?

While dolls were central to her practice as early as 1989, *The Doll Mouth Series* (2004) was the most obvious result of this experimentation (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). Using colour photography, Thorneycroft produced a set of close-up images of various dolls' mouths, images that reveal our society's ambivalent relationship to the sexuality of children. If dolls represent an ideal of childhood innocence, then Thorneycroft's images reveal those ideals to be latently pornographic, if not pedophiliac. As one's eye pans along the line of photos of dolls' mouths, a disconcerting pattern is revealed: almost all of the mouths resemble vaginas, except for those that resemble puckered anuses. As Steve Matijcio explains in the exhibit catalogue of the series, Thorneycroft's close-ups of dolls force viewers into a paradoxical and disturbing interpretive space:

> As stand-alone images they would be easily interpreted as sex toys and assimilated into a landscape of art world jadedness and adult sex industries. But in the context of this series, with their referent constituting a crucial interpretive fulcrum, these mouths grow more innocent and more disturbing. Perceptions are consequently pulled in opposite directions, caught between poles of idyllic childhood and pornographic obscenity that are equally frustrated by the enduring subject matter. (30)

While their use for the purpose of sociological critique seems to be the most obvious explanation of Thorneycroft's frequent use of dolls, the frequency and consistency with which she uses them suggests that there might be something more going on, that her use of them has more than a bit of the character of what Freud called "the compulsion to repeat" (17: 147). From a simple art-historical perspective, one could also argue that her frequent use of dolls is simply a tip of the hat to the powerful influence on her work of Surrealist artists and photographers such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Oskar Kokoschka, Salvador Dalí, and especially Hans Bellmer, all of whom experimented with mannequins and dolls (Sayer). For her part, Thorneycroft explained in an interview that she began to use dolls in her work because "[t]hey function as safe replacements to the corporeal body, providing distance and deflected identification with situations I place them in" (qtd. in Werier). Matijcio suggests that there is probably more to it than that, however, that they are more than simply replacements of the corporeal body. In their ambiguous position between toy and person, between childhood innocence and adult sexuality, they have the capacity to force us to reflect on our bodies in ways that we usually try to avoid. Thorneycroft's photos of dolls, Matijcio writes, inscribe "the accumulated sexual desires, fears, traumas, and experiences that circulate (in varying combinations) through every person's life, creating a contested zone between sensual instincts and social taboo" (34).

While Thorneycroft suggests that she simply uses dolls as stand-ins for the human body, and while Matijcio argues that she uses them to evoke what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject" (2)—the traumatic experience of those aspects of our bodily existence (urine, shit, vomit, seminal and vaginal fluids, pus, illness, death, etc.) that we must reject or disavow in order to maintain a "proper" social identity—Sharona Adamowicz-Clements argues instead that dolls act as harbingers of death. She makes this argument based on her reading of Freud's notion of "the uncanny" (17: 219–36), the unsettling experience of encountering something that is at once familiar and alien. According to Freud, what is alien in the uncanny is not actually something new to the perceiver but the return of a repressed fear, desire, memory, thought, or drive. In his words, the uncanny "is something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (qtd. in Adamowicz-Clements 15). Borrowing from Eva-Maria Simms's reading of Rilke, Adamowicz-Clements argues that the doll evokes the uncanny because it resembles "an infant corpse. She is a signifier of death. The doll as an inanimate object is 'lifeless' and 'indifferent.'" In her "unresponsiveness to the child's emotions, she threatens emptiness. . . . [T]he doll cannot love or offer . . . warmth and care" (18). More specifically, she continues, the doll becomes for the poet an uncanny

reminder of the death of his or her narcissistic infantile fantasy of at-one-ment, of unity, of unmediated connection with the mother. The child has a physically intimate and often comforting relationship with the doll in ways that resemble the child-mother relationship, but unlike the mother, the emptiness of the doll—its lifelessness, its indifference, its miniature size, and its coldness—can also remind the child of the trauma of the separation from the mother and provoke feelings of frustration and aggression toward the doll (18).

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In a fascinating discussion of how the myth of Pygmalion, the story of a sculptor who fell in love with one of his sculptures and convinced Aphrodite to bring it to life, was taken up in discussions of sculpture in modern aesthetics, Alex Potts concurs with Adamowicz-Clements's conclusions. Potts argues that the power of sculpture—in this case, a high-end variety of doll—to attract visual desire lies in its ability to act as a fetish object that "would seem momentarily to promise the spectator the experience of a simple world of oneness, without conflict and division." However, while the statue offers up this promise, it is quickly revoked once we are forced to come to grips with the fact that the statue is not an extension of the spectator's fantasy work but "an obdurate thing rather than amenable image or representation" (46). In these moments, Potts adds, the sculpture/doll reveals itself as "radically unassimilable to the self's desires, as hostile threat or barrier to these" (46–47). I will argue that the later work of Thorneycroft capitalizes fully on the uncanny ambiguity and polysemy of dolls. Her photographs of dolls activate and frustrate desire, stimulate narcissistic fantasies and subvert them, all in order to produce an identification with the dolls in her *tableaux vivants* and an anxious disavowal of that identification.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Thorneycroft shifted her

focus away from more obviously feminist themes to a critical examination of the emergence of what could be described as "Tim Hortons" or commodity nationalism in contemporary Canada (see fig. 4).[2] Briefly described, this is a form of popular and populist nationalism that emerged out of the cultural, political, and economic tumult of 1980s and 1990s Canada. Its key feature is a tight affective association between traditional markers of "Canadianness"—the nuclear family, hockey, winter, wilderness, rural or suburban working-class whiteness, rugged masculinity, and reluctant militarism—and commodities such as a "double-double," Molson Canadian beer, or Roots sweatshirts whose nationalism is embedded in the act of consumption.

While wrapping themselves around the flag makes sense for Canadian companies competing in an increasingly open economy, one of the perverse effects of the rise of Canadian commodity nationalism is that our political leaders and cultural institutions are following their lead. Our current Conservative federal government, for example, has taken to announcing major policy initiatives not in Parliament but at small-town Tim Hortons outlets, whereas perhaps the most ambitious public education campaign in recent decades—the Heritage Minutes series of commercials broadcast on Canadian television—was explicitly based on the logic of commodity nationalism. As Patrick Watson, the creative director of the Heritage Minutes project, explained in the 1998 documentary *Minute by Minute*, "If we can use thirty-second or one-minute slots on television to persuade people that Corn Flakes or underarm deodorant or Cadillacs are interesting, could we not use the same period in television to persuade Canadians that they have an interesting past?"

Obvious examples of Tim Hortons nationalism are the nationalistic ad campaigns for Canadian beer and for Tim Hortons coffee that saturated Canadian airwaves from the mid-1990s onwards. The most famous of these ads was Molson's "I am Canadian" advertisement featuring "the Rant." Premiering in 2001, this ad represents a so-called "average Canadian" named Joe taking to the stage to denounce American stereotypes about Canada and to affirm the contemporary Canadian construction of the nation as a bilingual, multicultural, peacekeeping, hockey-loving, and beaver-loving country. Cynthia Sugars has compellingly argued that this ad became so popular because it tapped into English Canada's ambivalence about its own nationality. On the one hand, she argues, English Canadians recognize that there is no one Canadian identity, that Canada is far too new and too regionalized and multicultural a country for anything approaching a homogeneous culture to develop. On the other hand, she adds, there is also a strong desire to be a "normal" nation, to have a shared language, ethnicity, history, cultural symbols, and so on (123–24). In other words, we want to be a monolithic nation, but

we also know that we cannot and should not even try.

Sugars argues that the genius of "the Rant" as a marketing tool for beer and for the nation is that it speaks the unspeakable—it expresses the desire to have a unified culture like the USA at the same time that it disavows or renounces this desire (128). This combination of desire for identity and renunciation or suspicion of that desire becomes clearest when the ad deals with what she calls the fetish objects of the Canadian nation (stereotypical symbols such as the beaver, lumberjacks, and igloos). She argues that, at the same time that Joe Canada rejects these stereotypes in his rant, he ends up secretly affirming them. In other words, at the same time that we know that they are stereotypes, we still feel compelled to identify with them—they may be lies, but they are our lies. We may be smart and sophisticated enough to see them as illusions, but we are still insecure enough about our place in the world that we prefer those illusions to the thought of our non-existence, or at least the arbitrariness of our existence (Sugars 133).

As Sugars and others have argued, these ads emerged in a period of Canadian history in which it was all too easy in the eyes of the English-Canadian cultural and political elite to imagine the arbitrariness or even non-existence of the Canadian nation. From the late 1980s until well into the twenty-first century, those who fret professionally about the future of the Canadian nation have seemed to have a lot to worry about. On the political-economic front, continental free-trade agreements, neo-liberal cutbacks to the welfare state, and the rise of economic globalization led many to wonder if the Canadian state—perhaps the only institution that links a highly regionalized country—could continue to hold Humpty Dumpty together. On the constitutional front, the 1995 referendum, the failure of the Charlottetown and Meech Lake Accords, and indigenous uprisings in Oka, Ipperwash, and Gustafsen Lake suggested to many that Canada's future as a unified nation was tenuous at best. Throw in perennial English-Canadian concerns about the state's inability to stop American culture from saturation bombing the Canadian cultural landscape, the perception that multiculturalism policy was allowing immigrants to refuse to adopt Canadian culture as their own, and anxiety about the multifarious challenges posed by the rise of feminism, gay and lesbian rights, and other forms of identity politics, and many began to lament that the Canada they knew, loved, and sired was being stolen from them.

What was worse for many of the lamenters was that the Canadian public seemed to be quite happy to let the theft of their national heritage take place. In articles, editorials, books, and speeches, a series of prominent Canadians publicly castigated other Canadians for their lack of knowledge about their shared national history and culture. Such jeremiads asserted that Canadians displayed a shocking

ignorance of and indifference to the glorious deeds, heroic sacrifices, and timeless wisdom of the founders of the nation. Without such a shared set of memories, stories, myths, and images of the sacred national homeland, they worried, Canada was falling apart.[3] In this rhetoric, the ongoing national unity crisis was redescribed as a national memory crisis (Hodgins, "Our Haunted Present" 104). True to the paternalistic logic of this rhetoric, there was a refusal to accept that events such as the Oka crisis or the widespread support for sovereignty among the Québécois were the result of the agency and commitment of competent, reasonable, and knowledgeable citizens. Instead, such events and their constituent actors were redescribed as being the product of a public that, while pure and innocent at heart, had been led astray by a dizzying and ever-growing list of seducers and thieves of shared heritage. The solution proffered to these problems is based on a double repetition: nostalgia-drenched lamentations for the good old days and calls to recreate and thus repeat these imagined past cultural conditions in our fallen present. What is to be taught to members of the nation is their so-called cultural heritage: stories of Canadian military valour and of the founding of the nation, images of the national homeland, a love of "distinct" national pastimes and rituals, a reverence for public, private, and ecclesiastical institutions, and so on. The future of the Canadian nation, we were told over and over again, was to be secured by repeating its past.

Several other nostalgic cultural texts that emerged in this period also provide key touchstones for Thorneycroft's recent work. The first and most obvious is the *Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* travelling exhibit that was organized in 1995 by the National Gallery during the height of nationalist anxieties about the possible breakup of the country. The exhibit was greeted with great excitement by the mainstream English-Canadian public and media who were desperate to prop up their identification with the nation. As Lynda Jessup argues, in spite of the fact that the Group's work has recently come under increased criticism by scholars, activists, and artists, "the Group's art is still being advanced as representative of the nation as a whole—as something shared by the nation's citizenry and therefore national—because it supposedly triggers national feeling in each member of its audience" (Jessup 143; see also O'Brien and White). *The Art for a Nation* show toured Canada around the same time that the Heritage Minutes ads, another set of key intertexts for Thorneycroft's work, were gaining national prominence. These were followed several years later by the CBC's similarly intended docudrama *Canada: A People's History*, with whose title, as we will see, Thorneycroft also plays. As I have detailed elsewhere, the Heritage Minutes are sixty-second historical vignettes or television commercials about heroes from the Canadian past that make use of formulaic plotlines, the reduction of historical

personages to recognizable stock characters, and an unapologetically celebratory tone ("Canadian" 246).

Thorneycroft's early work that engages with Tim Hortons nationalism can best be described as playful and ambivalent, at once subversive and reassuring. The first such collection of photographs was titled *The Canadian Martyrdom Series*. In this series, the setting of Thorneycroft's images shifted from the surrealist-inflected exploration of nightmarish inner worlds to an exploration of gender, race, and nation in contemporary Canada. "Starring" tourist-kitsch dolls of various Canadian heroes and heroines, this series directly quotes early modern Italian and Spanish *Pietà* paintings of the martyrdoms of various saints but transposes them to contemporary Canada. While they are often as jarring and abject as many of her earlier images, they also introduce an element of humour that was not present in her earlier work. While her photograph of an Anne of Green Gables doll holding a tray with her freshly severed bleeding breasts and of a Wayne Gretzky doll being torn apart by lions are more horrifying than funny, they are still funny.

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The Canadian Martyrdom Series also marked the beginning of Thorneycroft's experimentation with the form of the diorama, which was developed primarily as a three-dimensional museum display that sought to recreate the "typical" activities of animals or indigenous peoples in replicas of their "natural environments." The diorama has been described as one of the emblematic technologies of modernity because it caters to a Western investment of visual media in voyeuristic fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence and fetishistic fantasies of collecting and preserving an always disappearing past (see Steiner; Kamps). The funereal and fetishistic character of Thorneycroft's dolls and the dioramas, their silence and stillness, their

odd positioning between life and death all suggest that they act as a *mise en abyme* for photography itself. In "Photography and the Fetish," Christian Metz argues that "the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another kind of time. . . . [W]ith each photograph, a tiny piece of time brutally and forever escapes its ordinary fate, and thus is protected against its own loss" (140).[4] In doing so, the photo parallels the work of the diorama *and* the doll.

In *The Canadian Martyrdom Series* and in subsequent series, Thorneycroft constructs dioramas as haunting dollhouses in which her various gory and mutilated Canadian martyrs pose in a replica world of plastic miniature trees, houses, animals, and onlookers against a backdrop of kitschy sublime landscapes. She does not exhibit those dioramas, however. Instead, she photographs them and prints them as window-sized and colour-saturated prints that give the illusion of life and depth. To give an example, *The Martyrdom of St. Anne* (2005) is a digital photograph that follows fairly classic rules of pictorial composition (see fig. 5). In the centre of the image is a tourist-kitsch doll of a smiling Anne of Green Gables—one of the great Canadian fetish objects—who is holding out a tray invitingly. If viewers were to look more closely, they are likely to notice that her dress is stained with blood and that the tray contains a bleeding pair of severed breasts. In the foreground and flanking the mutilated Anne is a flowering meadow on which four plastic moose (half the scale of Anne) are positioned. In the left near background, we see a picnic table, some cases of beer, a cooler, a Coleman stove, and two equally iconic Canadian characters: Bob and Doug McKenzie.[5] In the deep background, we see another moose, some shrubs and grasses, and then a painting of a mountain lake that serves as the backdrop.

This image marks itself in numerous ways as being thoroughly postmodern according to the theories advanced by Linda Hutcheon. First of all, it is highly allusive, intertextual, and structured as an inside joke. To be able to get the joke, one has to be familiar with four very distinct "vocabularies": the diorama as a form of *tableau vivant*, the history of paintings of martyred saints (in this case, she is quoting *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha* by Francisco de Zurbaran), Canadian popular culture, and stereotypes about Canadian culture as being close to nature, inviting, and hospitable (Anne's offer of her breasts on a tray to viewers). Secondly, there's a clear delight in carnivalesque *mésalliances*: not only is the image a mash-up of religious iconography, high art, petit bourgeois tourist kitsch, and Canadian popular culture, but other elements are out of place. Anne is an Island girl and Bob and Doug are small-town southern Ontarians, but they are gathered together in a mountain meadow. Anne is often read as a nostalgic fetish object of a lost Victorian girlish simplicity and

innocence while now she is depicted as a suffering, passionate, and martyred woman. Similarly, if Anne represents the nostalgic and Victorian pole of Canadian culture, Bob and Doug represent its postmodern and parodic pole, as parochial, beer-swilling, and half-witted "average Canadians."

If one knows these codes, *The Martyrdom of St. Anne* is a witty joke. Like most jokes, it works by playing with a combination of incongruity, sadism, and shared codes. It produces incongruity by fusing the images of two symbols of devotion and innocence from two very different places, times, and aesthetic registers. The transposition of the sombre, sacred, and austere imagery of the suffering and martyred saint from the register of early modern religious art to the register of Canadian kitsch and, more specifically, to a doll of a fictional character that endures in the Canadian (and the global) imagination as a nostalgic symbol of Victorian innocence is, to say the least, jarring. Instead of a saccharine-sweet daughter of the soil who stoically suffers in WASPish silence (if she suffers at all) and keeps her shame "in the family," Thorneycroft's Anne displays her pain, her humiliation, her sexuality, and her passion in an all-too-public and spectacular and thus highly un-Canadian manner. This sense of incongruity is further heightened by the presence of Bob and Doug, the all-too-Canadian symbols of beer-numbed inarticulateness.

Like many jokes, this one is also cruel. The most obvious cruelty is the violence inflicted on a cherished and revered English-Canadian fetish object. When one views the entire series of Canadian martyrs, one gets the sense that they give vent to a barely repressed desire to destroy both the Canadian nationalist myth-symbol complex and the comfort that it provides. Another level of cruelty involves how the image can produce complex and disconcerting reactions in viewers. At the same time that one is horrified by the spectacle of gendered violence and repulsed by the apparent offer of a plate of bleeding masectomized breasts, the incongruity of the imagery also produces a surprised laughter, and the enigmatic presence of the moose and of Bob and Doug keeps one from looking away from this otherwise horrific scene. A final level of cruelty probably works only on those of us raised in the Cold War period in English Canada but who now live and love in a far more diverse, postmodern, and postcolonial Canada. An amused reaction to the violence perpetrated on Anne and on other icons of English Canada's WASPish and Victorian myth-symbol complex image might reveal that one shares Thorneycroft's destructive fantasies. In spite of the fact that many Canadians speak of themselves as tolerant and non-violent people, her images force Canadians to confront the possibility that there is some dark part of them that would also love to throw Wayne Gretzky and the fetishistic nostalgia he and Anne represent to the lions.

Figure 1: *Untitled (Witness)*, silver print, 32 x 26″, 1998

Figure 2: *Doll Mouth (Little Tongue)*, analogue photograph, C print, 28 x 28″, 2004

Figure 3: *Doll Mouth (Yawn)*, analogue photograph, C print, 28 x 28″, 2004

Figure 4: *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Lake and Mountain with Double-Double)*, digital photograph, C print, 2007

Figure 5: *The Martyrdom of St. Anne*, digital photograph, ink jet print, 40 x 50″, 2005

Figure 6: *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (In Algonquin Park)*, digital photograph, C print, 2007

Figure 7: *A People's History (View from Mt. Cashel, St. John's Harbour)*, digital photograph, C print, 2008

Figure 8: *A People's History (Terre Sauvage)*, digital photograph, C print, 50 x 36″, 2008

While it is true that *The Martyrdom of St. Anne* requires a knowledge of multiple codes to read it, it would not be fair to accuse Thorneycroft of producing this work simply to flatter the few Canadians who may have the time, resources, and inclination to develop competency in all of those more or less accessible codes. Her choice of widely known Canadian fetish objects (Anne, Bob and Doug, and the moose) as the centrepiece of the work signals her clear desire for her work to be available to a broader public. This work is thus designed to be a political intervention in the contemporary Canadian cultural struggle. It does not use slogans, however, but humour. As many twentieth-century artists and political activists have discovered, humour is a very effective vehicle for making political interventions because it can be ruthless in its play with the cultural codes that make up the "common sense" upon which the status quo rests. In the case of satire, humour no longer functions to celebrate the superiority of the community, the ethnic group, or the nation in relation to its neighbours, but serves instead as, in Simon Critchley's words, "an (un)timely reminder of who one is. . . . If humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be" (75).

While *The Martyrdom Series* took shots at a diffuse group of Canadian popular icons and the more general "branding" of Canada as a hockey-loving, small-town, peaceful, and egalitarian culture, the two newer series are much more pointed in their interventions in Canadian cultural politics. Their titles—*The Group of Seven Awkward Moments* and *A People's History*—serve as an obvious cue to this fact, making obvious reference to the Group of Seven, to the Heritage Minutes, and to the CBC docudrama *Canada: A People's History*. Less obviously, many of the subjects of Thorneycroft's "awkward moments" also have Heritage Minutes devoted to them: the Avro Arrow, Winnie the Pooh, Grey Owl, and Emily Carr. Even less obviously, she also plays with one of the core promotional and pedagogical techniques of the Minutes: repetition.

The title of the series, *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments*, signals a slight but politically significant change in Thorneycroft's formal technique from *The Martyrdom Series*. All the backdrops in this series are reproductions of landscapes painted by Tom Thompson, Emily Carr, and the Group of Seven, a choice that should not be viewed as a coincidence. In the foreground of the dioramas, children's dolls are placed in "typical" Canadian scenery (lots of snow, ice, trees, rocks, water, and wildlife) and arrayed in various *tableaux vivants*. Our typical Canadians are engaged in a series of activities that are at once stereotypically Canadian and surprising: Bobby Orr falls through the ice in a pond hockey game, Bob and Doug McKenzie blithely drink beer as hungry wolves circle their picnic table, Tom Thomson's drowned body

floats in a lake, the Avro Arrow has been retrofitted as a bush plane complete with pontoons, and a group of schoolchildren tests the myth that tongues stick to frozen poles with gory results (see fig. 6). While more than a bit didactic and heavy-handed, and perhaps even as moralistic as the medieval memento mori that they seem at times to evoke, the photographs' repeated injection of scenes of death, misfortune, and violence into those clichéd images reminds us that the latter lurk just beneath the wholesome and healthy image projected by Tim Hortons nationalism.

An artist who is used to controversy, Thorneycroft has expressed a stunned surprise about the reception of *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments*: people love her pictures and sales have been so brisk that she has been able to stop teaching as an underpaid stipendiary instructor at the University of Manitoba. Much as they can be gory and grotesque, there is something playful, comforting, and almost nostalgic about the photos in the *Awkward Moments* series. They seem to evoke—even as they disavow—an innocent and pastoral imagined Canada that is characterized by trips to the family cottage, pond hockey, and the days when, by and large, we could refer to Canada as "the Great White North" without thinking about the racial ramifications of that phrase. In fact, it could be argued that much of the surprising popularity of *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments* comes from the way in which these photographs tap into the same psychology that made the "I am Canadian" rant so popular. At the same time that the pictures cater to the contemporary art market by deploying many postmodern artistic practices that are now canonical—such as playful quotation, intermixing of "high art" and "popular art," the use of the grotesque and the uncanny, the mixing of media, and hyperreflexivity—the net result is less a profound destabilization and an interrogation of Canadian national symbols than a retrofitting of them for a sophisticated, knowing, and suitably ironic audience. In the same way that the rant provides mainstream audiences with the dual pleasures of demonstrating their critical acumen and their ongoing (albeit ironic) identification with Canadian symbols, *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments* allows members of the Canadian cultural intelligentsia to do the same.

One could go even further and argue that these series offer these Canadians a certain frisson of sadistic pleasure at the expense of those who propagate and identify with the kitschy confections of Tim Hortons nationalism. While many of the symbols celebrated by Tim Hortons nationalism were originally developed and were revered by the Canadian cultural intelligentsia for much of the twentieth century, a wide set of cultural causes has led to its loss of control over these symbols. The most obvious among these is the decline of a Masseyite vision of national culture, which assigned the role of producing, preserving,

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and propagating national culture to public institutions and to the members of the Canadian cultural establishment who staffed them, in favour of "market models" of culture production (see Litt; Kuffert; Edwardson). It has become commonplace for members of the Canadian cultural intelligentsia to blame MBAs for their loss of status in relation to the national project, but such laments bear more than a whiff of revisionist history. While it is true that the new prominence of marketing and public relations professionals has pushed some members of the traditional humanities-educated cultural elite aside, it is also the case that the former are often merely occupying spaces willingly vacated by many of the latter. As anyone who has spent time around Canadian universities in the last two decades will tell you, nationalism of any stripe has become distinctly unfashionable among cultural intellectuals. While there are very good reasons for this, one of the consequences has been that the corporate takeover of Canadian cultural nationalism has encountered only token resistance. In spite of the fact that many cultural intellectuals have willingly abandoned the project of defining the nation, they resent that the people whom they believe to be culturally and cognitively inferior to them continue to do so.[6] Given this context, the delight taken in Thorneycroft's desecration of Canadian symbols might be described as a form of resentful reappropriation on the part of the gallery-goers: these are my toys and I will break them so that you cannot play with them.

While Thorneycroft has admitted that one of the unexpected pleasures of producing and exhibiting *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments* was that it transformed her almost overnight from *enfant terrible* to favourite daughter, *A People's History* is likely to return her to her former status. While the photographs in the new series closely

follow the form and style of those of the earlier series, the innovation here is in its content. Instead of dark but playful revisions of Canadian symbols and myths, these new photographs reveal the dark secrets of Canadian history: the encrypted history of violence (often sexual violence) committed against women, children, and racialized Others by representatives of institutions charged with the task of defending and propagating so-called "core" Canadian values. Where her earlier work played ironically with tropes of Canadian childhood innocence, in *A People's History* an adult Canada is constructed as violent and predatory. As Leslie Frost has argued, nationalist discourse frames the nation as being childlike and innocent for very specific political purposes. Because childhood exists in the Western imagination as a realm that is somehow unsullied by historical experience and adult complicity and guilt, the use of tropes of childhood and innocence by nationalist discourse "divorces national identity from the social and juridical injustices and inequities that the nation has imposed upon individuals. It absolves a nation of accountability. . . . Innocence is the condition of being for the ideally principled person who is never compromised by the messy context of lived experience" (89). Thorneycroft's project in this new series is to make Canadian history messy by forcing adult Canada to take into account its own violence and guilt.

As of April 2010, this new series contained eight photographs, four of which deal directly with the issue of the sexual abuse of children by members of important Canadian institutions. More specifically, *A People's History (Night Island)*, *A People's History (View from Mount Cashel, St. John's Harbour)*, and *A People's History (Father Sylvester)* portray the sexual abuse of doll children by doll Catholic priests, while *A People's History (Coach)* evokes recent revelations that sexual predators like David Frost used their positions as hockey coaches to prey on young men, and two more deal with the tragic history of the Canadian residential school system. In *A People's History (Burning Braids)* and *A People's History (Terre Sauvage)*, we witness what can only be described as acts of cultural rape by priests and nuns: young indigenous girls are stripped of their "Native" clothing, their braids are cut off, and they are forced to throw these material reminders of their culture, their villages, and their families into a bonfire while, in one of the images, an RCMP officer watches over them. The two remaining images add to the overall theme: *A People's History (Pig Farm)* reproduces the pig farm of Willie Pickton—a serial murderer who has confessed to murdering forty-nine women—while *A People's History (Prostitute)* evokes child prostitution by depicting a partially nude girl doll standing in front of a much larger doll of a beckoning man on a couch.

When they debuted at the Carleton Art Gallery, the new photos were exhibited in conjunction with

The Awkward Moments. As visitors entered the long rectangular gallery that is divided by two half-walls, they first wandered through the earlier series. It was only when they arrived at the far half-wall near the end of the space that they encountered the first photo from the new series (*Pig Farm*) and only once they passed that wall into a small alcove created by the wall that they found themselves fully immersed in the catalogue of horrors depicted by this new series. Whatever the intention of curator Diana Nemiroff, this spatial arrangement was highly unsettling to viewers in several ways. As I have already argued, there is something tender, playful, comforting, and almost nostalgic about the *Awkward Moments* photos, as much as they can be gory and grotesque. Once confronted with the *People's History* photos, however, viewers were forced to confront the fact that traumatic acts of murder, abuse, sexual violence, and colonial domination are also part of the Canadian experience and the fact that Canadian institutions have been complicit in trying to entomb these acts by silencing the victims. Viewers were also forced to look back on these once-comforting symbols in the larger exhibition hall with fresh eyes. No longer could images from either series be experienced simply as slightly passé but still charming and ultimately harmless icons; *A People's History* reveals that images themselves can be complicit in hiding the sometimes predatory and criminal character of the Canadian nation-building process. The juxtaposition of the two series reconnects the spaces and histories of the Canadian pastoral to those of the Canadian carceral—the institutional sites in which the abjected members of the Canadian nation were subject to sexual and physical violence, stripped of their identities, and reduced to what Giorgio Agamben has called "bare life."

Juxtaposed in this manner, the two series mimic the structure of a joke. Like any good set-up, the *Awkward Moments* photos gain viewers' trust by providing the necessary context and by structuring their expectations of what will come next. In this case, viewers likely assumed that the new series would also be a Boschian, but slightly benign, twist on the world of Canadian myths, symbols, and icons. The punchline, *A People's History*, delivers all the implied discursive violence entailed in that descriptor, however. Like any good punchline, it both follows from the set-up and violates expectations by showing horrific images of implied violence, ethnic cleansing, and sexual predation. It thus produces disquieting results. Unlike our common experience of jokes, this joke does not produce laughter.

Among the many reasons that the joke is not funny is that Thorneycroft has constructed the images in a manner that forces viewers to identify, at least temporarily, not with the victims but with the victimizers, with the predators. We are "hooked" into the victimizer's gaze in two ways. The first is through

her use of dolls as props. In interviews, Thorneycroft has argued that she uses dolls in these photos simply because no one would allow her to use real children as models for her constructed scenes. While that is probably both empirically correct and morally right, I think that this explanation does a disservice to her own trickster-like cleverness. Given that the vast majority of people seeing these works would do so in a public setting, the use of real children would be likely to prompt expressions of disgust and moral condemnation and to result in the immediate act of looking away, lest one be identified as a pedophile. By using dolls, Thorneycroft makes it acceptable to stare, to linger on the full red and vagina-like lips of the dolls, their pretty half-child/half-adult faces, and the cherubic roundness of their half-naked bodies. In this almost cruel way, her images draw us into the world of the child molester's desire, a place where the vast majority of us are psychically programmed never to go. In fact, there is something siren-like about these images: their beauty and superficial innocence lures the viewer into a kind of psychic death, the loss of the boundary between the victimizer, the victim, and the witness.

The second way in which Thorneycroft hooks us is through her framing of our gaze. In *A People's History (View from Mt. Cashel)* (see fig. 7), both the position of the camera and the organization of looks between the onscreen characters destabilize the boundary between victimizer and witness. As Laura Mulvey has famously argued in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," one of the great pleasures of mainstream Hollywood film and mainstream popular culture in general is that of scopophilia—the voyeuristic pleasure of transforming women (and in this case, young girls as well as young boys) into the object of the controlling male gaze. Mulvey argues that this occurs in two ways. First, there is the obvious process of objectification, of the reduction of women by the camera to a passive fetish object of male visual pleasure. Second, this reduction is reinforced by the organization of gazes on screen—like the viewer, the men onscreen reduce women to objects of male visual and erotic desire (Mulvey 6–9; see also Wells, "The Photographic"). In many ways, *A People's History (A View from Mt. Cashel)* faithfully reproduces the scopophilic organization of vision. The focal point of the photograph is a brightly lit half-naked doll of a very young boy standing in a sandbox. Flanking him in the middle ground of the photo are two less-well-lit dolls of priests. One of the priests stands slightly behind the boy and to his right. In his hands, he holds what we can only assume to be the boy's clothes and leans toward him with a leering smile on his face. On his left and slightly in front of him kneels a second priest who makes direct eye contact with him while offering him a cup toward which he, like Eve, reaches trustingly. While we can

. . . we cannot look
but we cannot not
look either.

only guess what is in the cup, it is clear that it is a lure. The foreground contains two somewhat blurry and badly lit trees that frame the gaze and channel it into the centre along the lines of the coulisse in traditional landscape paintings. The background is A. Y. Jackson's *St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland*, a Group of Seven painting. All these formal devices work to draw our eye to the naked boy in the centre of the image. Because these devices are so familiar and so central to modernity's visual culture—the image is composed in exactly the same way as the countless paintings, photo spreads, and ads that we encounter every day—we cannot help but look because we have been thoroughly conditioned to look. It pushes all the buttons of our visual desire.

Once we realize what is going on, however, we feel compelled to look away. We find ourselves trapped between contradictory impulses: we cannot look but we cannot not look either. This vacillation between desire and repugnance is further exacerbated by additional cues provided by the subtitle of the piece—*A People's History (A View from Mt. Cashel)*. Mt. Cashel refers to an orphanage in Newfoundland that became notorious in the 1980s when many former students/residents came forward to report on the systematic sexual and physical abuse by Catholic priests and laymen that they endured while under its so-called care (see Harris). In the same way that museum dioramas re-enact the lives of ethnographic peoples engaging in their "typical" activities or animals in their natural environments, this diorama suggests that predation, sexual violence, and forced secrecy are typical of the life of children in male-dominated Canadian institutions. In such a situation, the backdrop of the action—the Group of Seven painting—is transformed from being a neutral formal device to a Freudian "screen memory" (3: 299–322)—a piece of nationalistic kitsch that represses and disavows the traumatic past by replacing it with a benign imagined past. If there

is anything that gets us off the hook in this piece, it is Thorneycroft's insertion of a figurine of a wolf in its foreground. Positioned as a witness to the action, its gaze doubles that of the viewer. Like the viewer-voyeur in the bushes, it can be described as innocent. This innocence is the product of the fact that it is in no way an active participant in the scene. Furthermore, because it is animal, we may believe that we can safely assume that it is cognitively innocent—it simply does not understand the psychological, social, and cultural significance of the scene unfolding before its eyes. At the same time, however, it is not just any animal. It is a wolf, a feral carnivore best known for its viciousness and its pack nature and anthropomorphized in "Little Red Riding Hood" as a sexual predator. The viewer is back on the hook: we are innocent and complicit, saints and predators.

In several other pieces in this series, Thorneycroft continues her exploration of the theme of priests behaving badly. *A People's History (Terre Sauvage)* and *A People's History (Burning Braids)* shift the focus away from the role of the Church in facilitating and protecting ordained sexual predators to its complicity with the Canadian state's war of ethnic cleansing waged against indigenous peoples from the late-nineteenth century well into the late-twentieth century. More specifically, these two photographs evoke the horrific history of residential schools. As has now been well documented (see Milloy), these were boarding schools run by various religious organizations but overseen by the federal Department of Indian Affairs with the express purpose of solving the so-called "Indian problem." By stripping indigenous children of their cultures, their religious and spiritual beliefs, their languages, and their ties to their families and to their bands, it was hoped that they would become "civilized Christians" and "productive workers."

A People's History (Terre Sauvage) (see fig. 8) captures this process of systematically organized cultural genocide with devastating economy and precision. The title itself—French for "Savage Land"—is drawn from the title of the painting by Group of Seven member A. Y. Jackson that serves as the backdrop for the diorama. Jonathan Bordo has argued that the Group of Seven's portrayal of the Canadian landscape as devoid of human presence obliquely supported a more general colonialist strategy of representation that sought to justify the Euro-Canadian invasion and occupation of the land on the grounds that it was somehow "empty." By whitewashing the land of indigenous peoples, he suggests, the Group of Seven helped to pave the way for Euro-Canadian claims that this is *their* homeland. If the original *Terre Sauvage* participated in this whitewashing in an indirect and diffuse way, there was nothing subtle about the Catholic Church's role in this process of ethnic cleansing. Thorneycroft's constructed image evokes the brutality of the Church's "teachings" by organizing the

image of cultural assimilation as a kind of mechanized, factory-like process. The two figures in the middle of the image are a completely naked doll of an indigenous girl whose hair is being cut off by a nun standing to her left. To the immediate right of the central figures are three indigenous girl dolls who are posed in ways that evoke early modern paintings of suffering female saints. While they are all averting their eyes from the action, two of the girls are wearing what tourist kitsch designers have decided to be "typical" indigenous clothes, jewellery, and hairstyles. The third, on the far right, has been shorn of her braids (which she holds mournfully in her hands) and stripped to her waist. Standing to the left are three other indigenous dolls—two girls and one boy. Unlike the others, they are devoid of any markers of their indigeneity—there are no braids or beadwork to be seen on them. As opposed to those of the others, their facial features and the way in which they are posed do not suggest sorrow but rather impassivity in the face of suffering. One doll even holds a freshly shorn braid in an almost playful manner or as though she is helping the nun.

If we look closer at the foreground and at the background of the image, the secret to this transformation comes clear. The two major elements to the foreground are situated at the feet of the "unassimilated" children on the right. The first is what appears to be a pile of braids and beaded jewellery in the far right corner. The second is a fire burning in the centre-right in which we can see a beaded necklace. Like the foreground, the background has two main elements (beyond the Jackson print). The first is the Mountie who stands and watches behind the nun and ensures that the work of spreading "peace, order and good government" carries on without resistance (Mackey 89). The other element is the outline of a building and its two lit windows out of which the de-indigenized children seem to have emerged. This is clearly the residential school.

Taken all together, these elements do more than increase our visual pleasure by creating a "balanced" composition. What Thorneycroft lays out in astonishing brevity is the entire horrific process of state-sanctioned cultural genocide through the use of nine dolls, a handful of props, and a Group of Seven print. The photograph invites viewers to watch an eroticized scene of cultural violation with a combination of attraction and repulsion. The narrative of the diorama seems to go as follows: if we scan the image from right to left, we begin with indigenous children who have been recently delivered to the school by the Mountie, the state-sanctioned kidnapper. Once he has delivered them, he stands back and passes them on to the nun who does the dirty work of stripping them of all that linked them to their families and their communities. As the children move from right to left, they become hybrid and impassive creatures. They are neither indigenous nor white, dead to the suffering of newcomers and perhaps

even willing to betray their people to curry favour with those in charge of the "total institution" in which they have found themselves enclosed. Furthermore, as the young girls and the boy are stripped of their dignity, their identities, and their agency, those symbols of English-Canadian culture—the Group of Seven and the Mountie—that are supposed to reassure us that Canada has, in the words of our current Prime Minister, "no history of colonialism" (Ljunggren), watch over the sickening scene as silent but complicit witnesses.

Most recently in *A People's History*, Thorneycroft plays what seems to be a cruel joke on her viewers. Using the same formal techniques and "look" developed in her more playful *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* series, she transforms her viewers from being co-participants in a series of slightly dark but ultimately nation-reinforcing jokes into witnesses to historical traumas perpetrated by Canadian institutions against some of the most vulnerable members of Canadian society. Even worse, in producing images of child abuse that seduce viewers into looking at the vulnerable and victimized through the eyes of the predator, she places us in the highly unsettling position of complicity with the predator. Finally, by flagging the fact that these traumatic acts are not individual histories but part of Canada's "People's History," she forces us to come to grips with our affiliation with a social order that reduces women and children of non-dominant classes and races to the status of chattel to be used and abused at the same time that it hides its own history of violence and predation behind the pretty screens of Group of Seven canvasses and the kitschy ads of Tim Hortons. Her message in these images seems to be simple: lying beneath the construct of Canadian childlike innocence is the real history of Canadian childhood and it is one marked by violence and vulnerability.

In her reconstruction of the "real" childhood of the Canadian nation, however, it is hard to say whether Thorneycroft is being any more faithful to childhood in Canada than those whose images she seeks to deconstruct. It could be that both sides are using "the child" as a polysemic rhetorical weapon to silence the other. As Mavis Reimer points out, this strategic use of "the child" as an empty signifier has dominated adult cultural-political discourse. As she explains, one of the key insights of child studies is that

> both *child* and the term in opposition to which it is defined, *adult*, are understood to index positions within a system rather than to have intrinsic content in and of themselves. "The child," then, is a position to which many categories of human beings can be, and are, assigned: indigenous people often are made to occupy the role in colonial discourses, for example, as were some women in Victorian discourses. (3)

Secondly, she argues that the hierarchical construction

by one group of "them" as children and of "us" as adults has far more to do with "our" projected desires and anxieties about "them" than with "their" actually existing behaviours, practices, beliefs, or dispositions (3). Finally, such constructions of "the child" are always bound up with issues of power and control. As Maria Tatar has written about children's literature, "no other body of literature constructs itself as champion, co-conspirator, or advocate of its audience . . . even as it resolutely aims to secure control of it. . . . [Children's literature is] a form of textual production that views the child outside the book as the target of disciplinary intervention" (740–41).

Thorneycroft seems to eschew much of the obvious paternalism of the construction of the child as target of disciplinary intervention in that her work seems to be less about prescribing appropriate behaviours for her constructed "children" than for her constructed adults. That is not to say that she does not invest her dolls with anxiety and desire. Clearly, she plays with what James Kincaid describes as the latent pedophiliac desire that underlies the highly eroticized Anglo-American construction of the child as "pure and innocent," as a blank slate upon which the narcissistic adult can project his or her desires and read off "a flattering image of his very self." As a result, Kincaid argues, we are faced with the dilemma that

> we are instructed to crave that which is forbidden, a crisis we face by not facing it, by becoming hysterical, and by writing a kind of pious pornography, a self-righteous doublespeak that demands both lavish spectacle and constant guilt-denying projections onto scapegoats. Child-molesting becomes the virus that nourishes us, that empty point of ignorance about which we are most knowing. (11)

While it is certainly suggestive and provocative, Kincaid's characterization of Anglo-American culture as latently pedophiliac may not apply universally anymore. At least within the circles of the urban Canadian cultural intelligentsia in which I have spent almost all my life, the combination of the acceptance of feminist discourses on sexuality and the replacement of religious language with that of psychotherapy as the primary vocabulary of the self has meant that the cult of childhood innocence and the associated cult of virginity that would seem to engender pedophiliac desire have fewer and fewer adherents.[7] That said, Kincaid's description of the vacillation between pedophiliac desire and its hysterical disavowal in the form of a scapegoat-producing "pious pornography" provides us with a potentially useful insight into Thorneycroft's construction of the child.

The keyword in Kincaid's derisive phrase to describe the representation of children in works such as Thorneycroft's *A People's History* that deal with

issues of pedophilia is not "pornography" but "pious." As I have demonstrated, Thorneycroft has made frequent use of dolls as ciphers for children throughout her career. Leading up to *A People's History*, she used them as allusive but indeterminate evocations of some nameless childhood trauma (*The Body, Its Lesson and Camouflage*), as devices for "making strange" the complex and contradictory ways in which the adult world eroticizes children (*The Doll Mouth Series*), and as vehicles for a more purely impish and even impious deconstruction of Canadian cultural myths (*The Canadian Martyrdom Series* and *The Group of Seven Awkward Moments*). In all these cases, it is safe to say that these works are only obliquely about children or childhood: they are about childhood insofar as the hurts, obsessions, and anxieties formed in childhood continue to be seen by artists, therapists, and other authorities of the culture of confession as the key to explorations of adult psychic life. In other words, childhood is used in Thorneycroft's early work to talk about adulthood. In fact, her early images playfully manipulate the dolls in a manner that fully capitalizes, in a generally self-reflexive way, on the power of the adult to use the figure of the child to speak about his or her memories, desires, and anxieties. Thorneycroft treats the dolls as toys to be marshalled as props in an adult's imaginative and artificial construction that communicates her reaction to her psychic or social worlds to other adults.

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A People's History, on the other hand, seems to mark a profound shift in Thorneycroft's use of dolls and, by extension, her understanding of the child/adult dyad. The images are far less playful, far more pious, and far less diverse. In the new series, child dolls are deployed either as victims or as helpless witnesses,

although, as noted above, there are a few exceptions to this generalization. The most obvious reason for this change seems to be in her choice of subject matter: the abuse of children and the murder of women. This choice of subject matter seems to have come with a reorientation of the subject position from which Thorneycroft constructs her tableaux. No longer the postmodern artist who intermixes social reality, surrealist imagery, and psychic obsessions through her constructed dioramas and her camera, she now seems to want to occupy the epistemological and ethical space of the witness, of the historical documentarian who does not create imagined worlds but who, using the medium and techniques that she has mastered, recreates the actually existing past. In doing so, her new work comes into dialogue with the history of the photographs of crimes against humanity and of natural disasters and with the way in which they position their contemporary viewers and their historical subjects. When we, as viewers, are confronted with images of violence (real or implied), these images force upon us an ethical obligation that goes beyond a simple demand for our attention. As Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert have argued, such images demand that we abandon the narcissistic or disinterested viewing positions of the voyeur or the spectator and that we take up the position of the witness. Such a demand places a heavy burden on viewers of the photograph in that it involves more than simply bearing witness to memories and injustice. Witnessing, these photographs contend, demands both that one demonstrates through words, thoughts, and actions how the experience of witnessing has altered one's orientation to social reality and that one works to convince others also to change their orientations in a manner that "has been informed by the living memory of prior testimony" (Simon and Eppert 178). In other words, images such as these do not simply demand our attention; they also demand that we change ourselves and then try to change others.

For an artist who has made a career on the construction of playful, dark, and allusive images, this shift is not without its risks. First of all, one could argue that at the same time as these new images are more politically engaged and ethically unambiguous than her previous work, they are also less interesting. As Roland Barthes has argued, images of violence leave us with little or no interpretive wiggle room. When confronted with images of violence, he writes, "someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us with nothing—except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence" (*Eiffel* 71). In the case of Thorneycroft, Barthes's reminder could be countered by the observation that her persistent use of dolls mitigates the "simple" need to acquiesce somewhat. It has frequently been argued that one of the reasons for the affective and rhetorical power of images such as those of lynchings, Nazi death camps, humanitarian crises, or the iconic image of a young Vietnamese girl

fleeing a napalm attack on her village, comes from a combination of the Western faith in photography as providing compelling "material evidence" for the existence of events and of a faith in what Nandi Dill, drawing on the work of John Durham Peters, calls the "pain experienced by the body [as] the litmus test for the veracity of a witness' testimony, acting as 'authenticity's last refuge in situations of structural doubt'" (Dill 5; Peters 717). Given this, Dill argues that "[t]he more that bodies speak of trauma (e.g. scars, bruises or tears) the more credible the image" (6). Thorneycroft's dolls, however, bear no scars; their smooth and opaque surfaces have not been torn by human fury and, while a few have received bad haircuts, their bodies remain plump and well-fed. Furthermore, the whole scene is so obviously constructed that we still seem to have some interpretive work to do.

Once we shear these images of their relationship to the material warrants provided by the documentary photograph or the bruised and torn body, however, another risk seems to arise: the risk that these images become a form of "trauma porn." As Susannah Radstone has argued in a recent critical review of the rise of "trauma theory" in the humanities, while it is always personally and professionally dangerous for an academic to question the moral impulses of anyone dealing with trauma, it remains the case that traumatic events and their victims have always attracted forms of experiencing that are quite different from those of the ethically prescribed dyad of testifier and witness. As she argues, "a focus on texts of catastrophe and suffering is bound to be inflected, also, by less easily acknowledgeable fascinations and fantasies concerning victimhood grounded in aggressivity, or a drive to voyeurism and control." Not only can such texts provoke sadistic and voyeuristic fantasies of control and blame, but also, Radstone argues, they can provoke the opposite: "At the same time, trauma sites, victims and texts also proffer the potential for a masochistic identification with victimhood" (23).

As I have read her recent work, Thorneycroft seems to want to explore this ambiguous and treacherous middle ground between the ethically pure realm of testimony and witnessing and the pornographic fantasies of sadistic control and masochistic victimhood. If we briefly compare *The Martyrdom of St. Anne* to *Burning Braids*, for example, perhaps we can better see the risks and rewards of her turn to testimony. In the former, she positions herself almost as a sadistic torturer, chopping off Anne's breasts and offering them to us, the always hungry viewer, with a kind of perverse delight, with the result that the horrific becomes eroticized and almost cartoonish, and we are forced to confront our shameful voyeurism. At the same time, however, Anne seems to have some sort of agency in all this—in the photo at least, it is she, after all, who has cut off her own breasts and is now offering them to us. In *Burning Braids*, on the other hand, Thorneycroft's child victim seems to be

a pure and innocent saint. Thorneycroft seems now to want to play it straight, to disappear behind the camera and to offer her viewers unambiguous images. Gone is the play with the unconscious drives, desires, memories, fantasies, and anxieties of the photographer and the viewer. Instead we have, to use Kincaid's descriptor, "pious" images of suffering child saints. This work is far more directly politically engaged, however, and in spite of its clearly artificial character, it seeks to act as a faithful witness to the testimony of members of groups who lack her rhetorical abilities and her access to "authorized" public space.

In her desire to provide faithful testimony to very real historical traumas, it can be argued, some of Thorneycroft's images gain a certain kind of moral clarity that her earlier work lacks. In fact, it is hard not to think that the force of these images comes from their simplicity, and even their obviousness. One of the defenders of the Heritage Minutes once described them as historical "one-liner[s]" (Logan and Waxman), and the same could perhaps be said for the works in *A People's History*. Similarly, if I and others have argued that the Heritage Minutes and other contemporary products of the Canadian heritage industry play it safe in their recounting of the past, it could also be argued that Thorneycroft plays it safe as well. After all, there are few people in contemporary Canada who are going to advocate in favour of sexual predation or ethnic cleansing, and even her targeting of the Catholic Church is not likely to offend the majority of the members of the overwhelmingly secular and cosmopolitan public that frequents contemporary art galleries. What is more likely is that that same public will be puzzled by her seeming abandonment of postmodern playfulness for pious pronouncement.

Perhaps this recent work should be seen as an attack on what is being described by some as the increasingly suffocating postmodern codes of cynicism, irony, self-reflexivity, and tail-biting intertextuality that have come to dominate the contemporary high art scene's relationship to memory as much as an attack on Canadian corporate nationalism. Perhaps we should read Thorneycroft's new work as being a Canadian harbinger of what is being called "post-postmodernism" or "the new sincerity." As David Foster Wallace contends, the new post-postmodern artistic rebels who "dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who . . . treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions . . . with reverence and conviction [and w]ho eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue . . . might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.'" Such artists take seriously Fredric Jameson's dictum that "History is what hurts, it is what refuses [narcissistic] desire" (102) and believe that, as witnesses to history, they have the moral duty to pass on their testimony to their fellow humans. If we accept that Thorneycroft's

recent work is rooted in Wallace's call to move past the ironic postmodern questioning of the veracity of memory or the smugly smiling products of the PR-crafted, focus-group-vetted, multi-platformed, state- and corporate-funded Canadian "heritage industry" and to use her public position to serve as a witness to the sufferings of women and children who were denied their voices by powerful Canadian institutions, then we also have to accept the eloquent silence of her dolls.

This is not an easy pill to swallow. For some of Thorneycroft's viewers, the challenge might be that her continued use of dolls—with their ontological ambiguity and their capacity both to evoke and to frustrate desire, identification, and stable meaning—troubles any attempt to read off a clear moral message or straightforward account of history, childhood, or Canadianness from *A People's History*. It could well be that her dolls might say more about the fluid boundaries between history, memory, fantasy, and desire than they do about actual events. We seem then to be placed back in familiar territory explored in her far more postmodern and neo-surrealist earlier work: we know that someone somewhere has been hurt at some point in the past but we cannot say for sure what is "authentic" memory and what is fantasy because we are frustrated by the uncanniness and ambiguity of the dolls, the dioramas, and the digital photographs.

Unlike her earlier images, however, Thorneycroft gives us far more indicators that her dolls are meant to be read as stand-ins for "real" victims and victimizers. There are, for example, the titles that refer directly to historical events and clear intertextual references that would be familiar to most English Canadians. While they are not live documentary photos or even straightforward re-enactments of historical events, these images do have a legibility, a reverence, a conviction, and a sincerity that seem to differentiate them from her earlier work. In an era of cultural production in which transgression has been institutionalized through the heavy use of allusion, play, irony, cynicism, and the exploration of pseudo-edgy subject matter, Thorneycroft seems to have learned a new way to transgress with her use of dolls: the images voice her outrage in a forthright manner at the same time as they retain the postmodern awareness that it is in the very nature of art, language, memory, and media that one can never tell the full story. Problematic as they might be to Canadian nationalists and to "knowing" cosmopolitan gallery-goers, the images try to say something about the submerged history of Canadian childhood.

Whether this is an aesthetically or ethically good thing depends, I suppose, on one's commitment to the reigning postmodern consensus or on one's sense that its time has passed. Are the dolls in *A People's History* regressive and nostalgic in their attempt to evoke a pre-postmodern world of moral clarity and narrative continuity, or are they harbingers of a post-postmodern world in which sincerity, reverence, moral conviction,

and certainty become the hallmarks of the new intellectual and artistic rebels in their struggles against the neo-Orwellian institutional "rebranding" of all sorts of distasteful social and historical realities? While I have no answer to this question, I suspect that it is to be found in the dolls themselves and in the way in which they evoke comforting fantasies and desires at the same time that they frustrate and subvert those very fantasies and desires. Like Thorneycroft's photos, they both speak to us and remain bafflingly and hauntingly silent. Like the photograph and perhaps even like memory itself, that is their attraction and that is their threat.

Notes

[1] Thorneycroft's website contains a digital archive of her entire body of work, including the images discussed in this essay. See also Plohman's M.A. thesis on Thorneycroft's work and the "unacceptable sublime."

[2] For more on commodity nationalism in Canada, see Carstairs; Cormack; McGregor; Millard, Riegel, and Wright.

[3] For the now-classic articulations of the Canadian memory crisis, see Bliss; Granatstein. Their arguments have been roundly criticized within the Canadian historical community. For a sample of the critical reaction to their jeremiads, see Strong-Boag; McKay; McKillop; Stanley.

[4] As Roland Barthes famously argued in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph evokes the return of the dead, the spectral. The moment of being "captured" by the camera, he writes, "represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre" ("Extracts" 23).

[5] For more on Bob and Doug, see Pevere and Dymond 104–06.

[6] It is important to note that I am not making the empirical claim here that members of the Canadian cultural intelligentsia are measurably more intelligent than members of other Canadian "class fractions." I am simply following Pierre Bourdieu in suggesting that members of the cultural intelligentsia use the lexicons of "taste," "sophistication," "intelligence," "knowledge," and so on to prop up their own status in relationship to members of the commercial and administrative elite and members of the working and middle classes.

[7] In making this claim, I am not trying to suggest that pedophilia is not a problem among members of the cultural intelligentsia or that it is exclusively a problem of members of religious communities or the rural lower classes. I am simply questioning whether the cultural conditions that Kincaid suggests are at the root of pedophiliac desire exist universally in postmodern Canada. Furthermore, like many others nowadays, I suspect that pedophilia has far more to do with biological and neurological factors than cultural ones.

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